Alberta Motorist, March/April 80

CANOEING THE NORTHWEST TERRITORIES

WHERE THE SIGNS OF CIVILIZATION ARE FEW

by Craig McInnes

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Canoeing the Northwest Territories

Where the signs of civilization are few

Today, it's not uncommon to have to make reservations to canoe some of the more popular waterways in North America. In some areas, flocks of paddlers seeking relaxation in the wilderness fill rivers and lakes to the point where it is virtually impossible to find solitude.

But while canoeists are battling it out bow-to-stern in southern Canada and the US, a few more adventurous souls are heading northward to the thousands of miles of rivers and lakes that offer some of the best canoeing in the world, and where signs of modern civilization are few.

On a recent trip east from Great Slave Lake in the Northwest Territories on the Lockhart, Hanbury and Thelon rivers, three friends and I were able to spend six weeks in the wilderness in superb canoeing country with only wildlife and the history of the area for distraction.

Originally travelled by native hunters, this route was later followed by explorers and still later, by trappers and prospectors. One of the more famous adventurers to travel in this area was an eccentric Englishman named John Hornby, who called the barren lands to the east of Great Slave Lake "the land of feast and famine." Hornby, with two companions, starved to death in a rough cabin on the banks of the Thelon River in 1927.

For those who had to depend on the land for food and clothing, it was a fitting title. When the great herds of caribou, numbering in the hundreds of thousands, migrated through the area there was plenty of food. But when they inexplicably changed their migration patterns, a hunter could roam for hundreds of miles in any direction and find nothing larger than a *sic-sic*, the vociferous arctic ground squirrel.

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The closest point to the barrens by road is Yellowknife, a 1450 km drive from Edmonton. In the NWT services are few, with as much as 330 km between gas stations, so a close eye must be kept on the gas gauge.

From Yellowknife, access to the river systems is gained by chartered aircraft. Several companies based in Yellowknife have float planes capable of carrying a party with two or three canoes. For a starting point, you can pick any stretch of water large enough for the plane to land. With over 1,000 canoeing kilometres between Fort Reliance on Great Slave Lake, and the Inuit community of Baker Lake, the main determining factor is usually the amount of time a group has to spend on the river.

We decided to begin on Great Slave Lake at Fort Reliance. The clear, cold waters offer excellent fishing for trophy-sized lake trout. The starting point at Fort Reliance is Pike's Portage, named after Warburton Pike, an explorer who passed through the area at the

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An area of sand dunes on the Hanbury River. The area is devoid of any sign of human activity.
Top: making our way across Artillery Lake by pushing our canoes across the ice... sometimes in the freezing rain.

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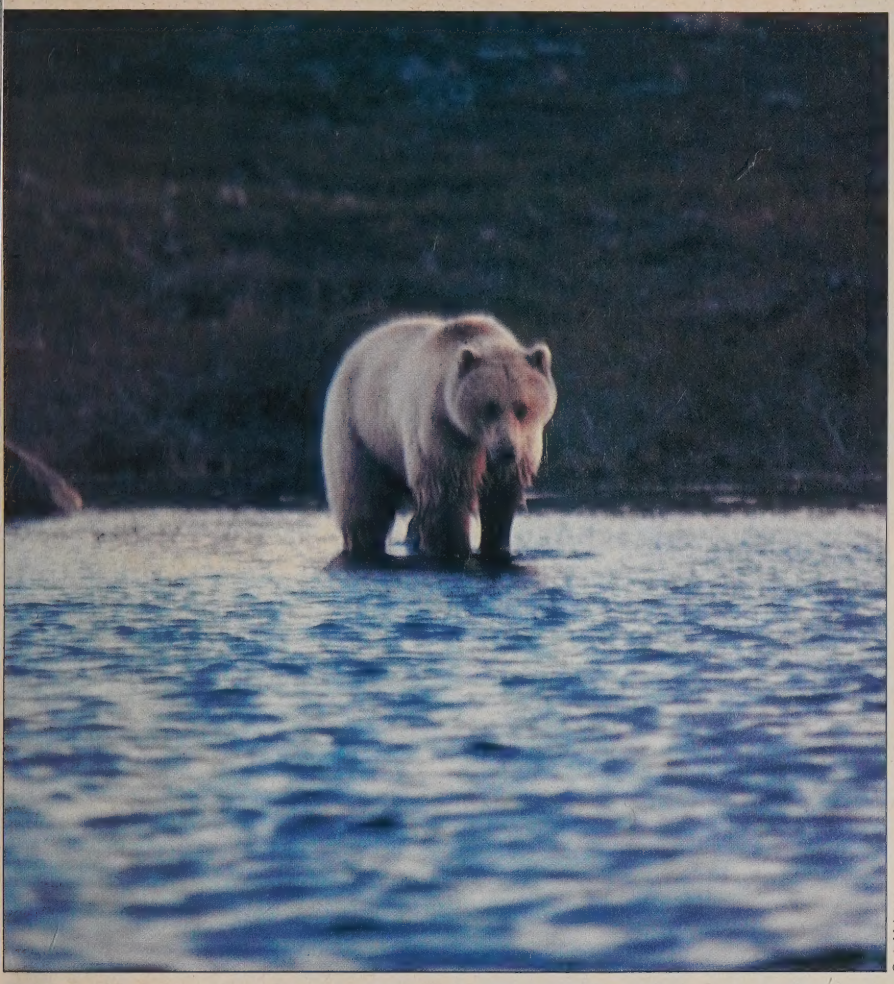

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The bear waded a little way out to peer at us. It didn't seem aggressive, or frightened, merely curious.

turn of the century. It is actually a series of small lakes and portages which connect Great Slave Lake and Artillery Lake. Canoeists choosing this route should get into shape before heading out. The first portage is 5.2 km long and has a total rise of just over 150 m. This may not seem too rigorous until you think about how many trips have to be made over the portage with the canoes and all the gear at the beginning of the trip.

This route does have its rewards, however. As you climb out of the boreal forest around Great Slave Lake you can clearly see the transition into the barrens as the spruce trees give way to low-lying willows, bare rock and tundra.

The land seems lifeless at a distance but closer inspection reveals an abundance of plant and bird life. A wide variety of sandpipers, plovers and other shore birds can be found nesting on the shores of the lake. The tundra camouflages the nests of sparrows and other small birds, and in cliffs along the rivers and lakes, cliff swallows live side by side with rough-legged hawks, peregrine falcons and other raptors.

One of the problems with canoeing in northern Canada is the short duration of the ice-free season. Conditions change from year to year, but it is not unusual to encounter ice on larger lakes up to the end of July.

"Then I noticed a large fawn-colored object along the bank 75 yards away. Out came the binoculars. 'Grizzly!' I yelled."

Time restrictions on our part forced us to start our trip in the middle of June. We had been warned to expect Artillery Lake to be mostly frozen but decided to push on regardless.

It was with a glorious feeling of accomplishment that we topped the last portage before Artillery Lake. Surely, we thought, the hardest part of the trip was over. There would be more portages later on, but our loads would be lighter and we would be in much better physical condition.

The sun was high in the sky and the lake seemed to be a long sparkling jewel in the distance. On the far horizon, however, we could see a thin white line that we knew marked leftover winter ice. Little did we know then that we would look back fondly at the relatively easy times we had crossing Pike's Portage while we struggled our way along that ice-bound lake in the rain.

As the oldtimers had predicted, most of Artillery Lake still wore its winter coat. We were able to proceed by skirting along the edges and later, as we gained confidence, by pushing and dragging our canoes along the ice itself. Ptarmigan Lake and Sifton Lake, two other large lakes on the route, were also locked in ice.

Artillery Lake is about 100 km long, with its barrens beginning at its halfway point. The best camping spots are found in the lee of eskers, where miniature spruce trees congregate. We carrried bits of firewood we found along route with us in the canoe, like waterborne wood peddlers.

After a long day of paddling and ice-breaking on Sifton Lake, we pulled into a small flat point in the fading light at about 11 p.m. to find a place to camp. The point looked promising, not too boggy and with enough flat ground to erect our two tents.

Then I noticed a large fawn-colored object along the bank about 75 yards away. Out came the binoculars for a closer look and then we quickly hopped back into the canoe and pulled away from shore.

"Grizzly," I shouted to the other canoe.

Keeping a respectful distance, we pulled out our cameras and tried to photograph the furry hump in the twilight. The bear finally noticed us, waded a little way out into the water and stood on its hind legs to peer at us. It didn't seem frightened or aggressive, merely curious. After a few minutes it climbed back on to the bank, curled up and went to sleep. We had been on the trip for weeks, and while we had seen plenty of tracks, the bear was the first animal we had encountered since starting out. We decided to paddle on and look for a less crowded campground.

Shortly after crossing the boundary into the Thelon Game Santuary, the land seemed to come alive. Several times, rounding a bend in the river, we would come across a majestic musk-ox grazing by the bank of the river, or a solitary moose in a willow swamp. Moulting Canada geese ran long the sandy banks and into the bushes at our approach, and swans flapped down the river ahead of us in a fruitless attempt to get airborne. Once, while a gaggle of geese watched us warily from the shore, a wolf leapt from the bushes and seized one by the neck. We saw several wolves and pups at a distance but most lost little time in making themselves scarce when we approached. We came across one, however, dozing by the bank of the Thelon, who allowed us to get within about 6 metres before he rose and ambled away.

A few kilometres further on we came across a portion of the Beverly Caribou herd and for three days we were constantly surrounded by thousands of the ungainly-looking beasts, many of them with calves trailing along be-

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hind. We sat at one spot for about one-and-a-half hours while a steady stream of caribou made its way across the river, a few metres upstream from us.

The route provides a fantastic variety of terrain and canoeing conditions. In a single day on the Hanbury River, canoeists can experience large lakes with no noticeable current, negotiable rapids, and steep canyons where the river tumbles over ledges and waterfalls which would provide a quick end for any canoeist caught in their tumultous grip.

It is, of course, impossible to find any place on earth where there are absolutely no signs of the twentieth century. Even in the Antarctic, scientists have found traces of pollution in the snow. A group of Canadian and American adventurers who followed Hornby's route and wintered in a cabin in the Thelon Game Sanctuary were thwarted in their attempt to relive the past when they stumbled onto a piece of the future last winter. Two members of the six-man party, returning from a dog-sled trip up the river, came across a large fragment of the Cosmos 954 nuclear-powered satellite which had crashed to earth two days earlier. Their winter tranquility was soon shattered as the military moved in and set up a temporary base near their cabins.

Although the plunge of the twentieth century artifact into a land where life still revolves around patterns established thousands of years ago added another chapter to its colorful history, it has done nothing to detract from its allure to the wilderness canoeist. These barren lands still provide one of the few remaining areas on earth where it is possible to view from the top of a rise a vista that is virtually unchanged from the time the first explorers set eyes on it.

Preparing for your trip

The very aspect of wilderness that makes canoeing in the Northwest Territories so attractive can prove fatal for those who don't treat wilderness travel with the respect it demands. A spill into frigid waters can be very serious, when help may be hundreds of kilometres away.

Wilderness canoeing demands a certain amount of preparation. Anyone contemplating a canoe trip in the north should find out as much as possible about the area before the trip. Talk to others who have travelled in the area and read as many trip reports as you can.

TravelArctic, the NWT government's travel information service, has a booklet entitled *Canoe Canada's Arctic*, which has general information on canoeing in the NWT as well as a list of 24 of the more popular canoe routes. These range in length from less than 30 km to more than 1600 km.

TravelArctic will also send trip reports for some of the rivers listed. Write: TravelArctic, Government of the NWT, Yellowknife, NWT X1A 2L9.

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